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**BILLERICAY: Traveller pitches to be slashed**

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THE tide is turning as the Government finally takes note of the burden travellers are putting on our community and reduces the number of new pitches needed.

Under fresh proposals, Basildon District Council will have to provide only an additional 62 legal pitches for gipsies – the original figure was set at 81 in January last year.

The initial number was decided by the East of England Regional Assembly but Government planning experts reduced it by 10 in December.

But the fight continues, leader of Basildon District Council Malcolm Buckley said it will drag the proposal through the courts unless Secretary of State for Communities Hazel Blears eases future pressure further.

He said: "It seems as though the secretary of state has realised that the methodology to calculate the original figures was ludicrous.

"At last something is being done, it appears as though the message is being understood but it needs to happen quicker.

"I don't understand why councils like Southend don't have to make any significant provision and we do."

Currently gipsies camped illegally in Billericay and Wickford are waiting to hear whether or not the House of Lords will hear their case to stay after the Court of Appeal ruled they could be evicted.

But the battle could have been in vain if they are eventually offered new sites within the district, said Cllr Buckley. "I don't think the answer is to make unauthorised sites legal because that makes a mockery of the planning process."

The new suggestions will now go through a three-month consultation process before the council receives a final figure by the end of the year.

Travellers fear that reducing the number of new sites means they will have nowhere to live if they are evicted from illegal sites at Dale Farm, Billericay and Hovefields, Wickford.

Traveller spokesman, Richard Sheridan said: "We are just like sitting ducks waiting for what's going to happen next. It costs the council £50million a year to keep us on the road."



UNCERTAIN: Families at the Crays Hill site await their fate. Photos by Anthony Channer bg ac 220109 09 41t